

“If you Can’t Have a Friend, Make One”: Lucky McKee’s *May* as a Revision on Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*

María Isabel Martín Ayuso

Universidad de Salamanca

Abstract

It is widely recognized that Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* has always been an important source of inspiration for films. Since the very beginning of the twentieth century, countless examples of cinematic adaptations of the novel have been produced. In fact, these revisions have radically changed the perception of the original *Frankenstein*. Moreover, in some cases they are even more popular than Mary Shelley’s original tale of horror. A large number of articles have been devoted to the field of the adaptations of *Frankenstein*. However, the appearance of new revisions of *Frankenstein* renders necessary the emergence of new actualized studies. The aim of this paper is to contribute to this field, analysing one of the latest covert versions of the myth of Frankenstein: *May*; a film written and directed by Lucky McKee in 2002. *May* tells the story of a lonely and mentally disturbed young woman who is finally pushed into insanity in her quest to find a perfect friend that never appears. The motto proposed by Lucky McKee for his film is quite descriptive, “If you can’t have a friend, make one”, and this is precisely what the protagonist proceeds to do by using parts of different people. In his version of *Frankenstein*, Lucky McKee is going to denounce one of the principal evils in our society: the lack of moral principles and real affection bear monsters.

It is widely recognized that Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* has always been an important source of inspiration for films. This can be explained because, as Bruhm has asserted, gothic literature “has always been a barometer of the anxieties plaguing a certain culture” (Bruhm, 2002: 260). Since the very beginning of the twentieth century, with the appearance of Dawley’s *Frankenstein* (1910), countless examples of

cinematic adaptations of the novel have been produced. In fact, as Paul O'Flinn has argued, these revisions have radically changed the perception of the original *Frankenstein* (O'Flinn, 1995: 22). Moreover, in some cases these versions of *Frankenstein* are even more popular than Mary Shelley's original tale of horror. According to J. Hillis Miller, cited by Lefevere in *Translation, Rewriting and the Manipulation of Literary Frame*, this can be explained because our common culture is everyday less related to books and more related to visual representations (Lefevere, 1992: 15). The impact of these visual representations is such that, as Pedro Javier Pardo has pointed out, it must be considered that a large number of contemporary versions of *Frankenstein* are not based on Mary Shelley's text but on previous film adaptations (Pardo García, 2005: 224).

The term *adaptation* is commonly defined as "a written work that has been recast in a new form". Pardo suggests that the problem with this definition is that it seems to establish a one-way relation, inevitably characterised by fidelity or betrayal, between film and text (Pardo García, 2005: 238). Moreover, he proposes the concept of *intertextuality* as an alternative to explain how a literary text can be a source for films in many different ways. Among the cinematic versions of *Frankenstein* it is possible to find some films that, far from being a direct imitation of the novel, revisit the myth with more freedom, *adapting* it to contemporary cultural features –such as the latest progresses of science, the human loneliness, the intolerance towards different people, etc. This is what Pardo understands as "covert adaptations". Therefore, an *adaptation* can be also defined as "a practise of cultural intertextuality" (Pardo García, 2005: 240); and actually, it is much more interesting to analyse the cinematic versions of *Frankenstein* from this "non-restrictive" point of view. In general terms, the novel and its cinematic *adaptations* conceive the characters of *Frankenstein* in different ways; but, as Lavalley has pointed out, "they carry the burden of similar conflicts" (Lavalley, 1982: 244).

A large number of articles have been devoted to this topic¹. However, the appearance of new revisions of *Frankenstein* renders necessary the emergence of new actualized studies. The aim of this paper is to contribute to this field, analysing one of the latest covert

¹ Within the most remarkable ones we can mention those of M. Tropp, W. Nestrick, B. Zakharieva, M. Grant, P.J. Pardo García or C. Lanone.

versions of the myth of *Frankenstein*. This is the case of *May*, a film written and directed by Lucky McKee in 2002 which was awarded in Sitges 2002 and in the Semana Internacional de Cine Fantástico de Málaga 2003. *May* tells the story of a lonely and mentally disturbed young woman who is finally pushed into insanity in her quest to find a perfect friend that never appears. The motto proposed by Lucky McKee for his film is quite descriptive, “If you can’t have a friend, make one”, and this is precisely what the protagonist proceeds to do by using parts of different people.

The outstanding innovation in *May* is that there is not any difference between *Monster* and *Monster-maker*, but both of them are embodied in the same person, May Kennedy. Lucky McKee revises *Frankenstein* considering that humans have the capacity of been monsters and monster-makers at the same time.

Taking the shelleyan figure of the monster as a point of departure, it is not difficult to find similarities between the character of May and the rousseauian monster proposed by Mary Shelley. According to Rousseau, human beings are good by nature; the same thing can be applied to Mary Shelley’s monster. Victor Frankenstein’s creation was originally good and willing to help, but the constant rejection of a society that identifies beauty with goodness forces him to become evil. Despite her introversion, May is also a “good girl” willing to do whatever is necessary to be accepted by other children, but far from becoming part of a group she is going to be a constant object of mockery. Both Mary Shelley’s monster and May are subjects of rejection because they are “different”, even “weird”; and in both cases this rejection is going to have its consequences.

On the one hand, Mary Shelley’s monster is initially depicted as a “child” in search of acceptance; but as he was rejected again and again because of his physical aspect, he becomes a merciless murderer. On the other hand, May Kennedy has had a childhood marked by disdain due to a problem of squint in one of her eyes. May has never had a real friend apart from Susie, a rag doll made by May’s protective mother. However, Susie is a disturbing element in the film: a rag doll with a disproportionate head, absolutely pale and with big blue eyes which serve to highlight May’s main physical imperfection. Susie is so delicate that it can not be neither touched nor squeezed, and it always has to be protected by a showcase. As well as in the case of Mary

PROCEEDINGS 31ST AEDEAN CONFERENCE

Shelley's monster, which lives a fictitious friendship with the DeLacey family when they do not even know about his existence, May's first friendship is unreal. This is going to make her become an introverted person unable to relate in a normal way.

When May becomes an adult, she is going to undergo some physical changes that transform her into an attractive woman. As Menegaldo stated, in the revisions of *Frankenstein* it is easy to find that the monster is no longer different from the rest of human beings in his external appearance (Menegaldo, 1998: 23), as in the case of May. However, even if May starts to be socially accepted for her new physical aspect, we find that inside her still survives the monster that she has been throughout all her life. After this physical change May starts her quest in search for "a friend to hold"; but she fails attempt after attempt.

At first she meets Adam (Jeremy Sisto), whose main hobby is to watch and produce gore movies, and this is precisely the point that seems to link May and Adam, the taste for blood and entrails. Adam and May have a brief romantic encounter, but the relationship fails because May, who is unable to establish the limits between fiction and reality, tries to prove her love for Adam by biting him –as she had previously seen in a gore movie. Therefore Adam, who seemed to be quite open-minded, discovers that "his girl" is too weird, even for him. Adam tries to end the relationship, but May desperately needs to be loved and she is going to chase him in an obsessive way until she finds out that he has already found a replacement for her.

In Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* when the monster is expelled from the house of the DeLaceys "feelings of revenge and hatred filled *his* bosom" (Shelley, 1999: 211). In the case of May, Adam's rejection is going to feed the old resentment that May has inside, and she is going to blame Susie, her only "friend", for the failure of the romance. The experience with Adam is going to be followed by other similar experiences with an identical end. May is going to understand how difficult it is to find a real friend in a contemporary society, not only characterized by the importance of appearances but also more interested in fulfilling selfish purposes than in giving affection. In this way, Lucky McKee is going to denounce one of the principal evils in our society: the lack of moral principles and real affection bears monsters.

Rejection and lack of love are to blame for the evil transformation of the rousseaunian monster; May is going to take revenge for a society that has been unable to accept her. According to Cristina Garrigós, the monster always reacts violently against society in the revisions of *Frankenstein*; but in the same way he is always considered a victim of his circumstances and therefore his behaviour is justified (Garrigós, 2002: 163). As well as the shelleyan monster, May feels “inflamed by pain” (Shelley, 1999: 214) and this forces her to become a murderer. Curiously enough, in the case of *May*, it is this rejection and later resentment that is going to transform the rousseaunian monster into an evil Creator.

In any case, throughout the film it is common to find some hints which are going to anticipate this transformation. One of the most significant ones is the fact that, especially in her relationships, May seems to be absolutely obsessed with perfection. This is quite striking, not just because it is precisely the imperfect monster the one seeking perfection; but also because those who surround her, members of a society that praises excellence, tend to underline that imperfection is the only way to make things special. For instance, Adam is going to say “Nobody is perfect”, and Polly (Anna Faris) is going to go even further by saying “My grandmother used to say that imperfection is what makes you special”.

Up to this point May has been quite aware about the imperfect character of the world. However, she has also realized that even though the world is flawed, it is possible to find bits of perfection everywhere. She finds perfection in Adam’s hands, in Polly’s neck, in Ambrosia’s legs, and in Blank’s arms, significantly tatooed with the portrayal of Frankenstein’s monster. According to the postmodern conception, reality is considered as fragmented, that means that it is made out of different “pieces of reality”. In a similar way May perceives perfection not as a whole, but as a composite of pieces of perfection. When May is rejected by Blank she decides that the moment of putting together these pieces has arrived. If it is impossible to find a real friend in a society which praises the fulfilment of selfish goals to the detriment of affective values, then the only way out is to make one. At this point, May Kennedy, the *monster*, is going to become a *monster-maker* in order to give birth to the “perfect friend”.

PROCEEDINGS 31ST AEDEAN CONFERENCE

In spite of sharing common features -such as the search of perfection and the need of acceptance- , it is important to state that the reasons that lead May and Victor Frankenstein to become *monster-makers* are very different. In fact they do not perceive the terms “perfection” and “acceptance” in the same way. While Victor Frankenstein considers “perfection” as the capacity of a human being to defy natural laws and become immortal; May perceives perfection as something fragmented, unable to exist as a whole unless somebody assembles the pieces. Victor Frankenstein wants to be recognized for his contribution to the scientific field; whereas May just wants to be accepted like she is by those who live around her.

The process of creation of the new creature is one of the most outstanding moments of the film –whereas in Mary Shelley’s novel we do not really find an accurate description of this moment. May’s new friend is going to be made not just from parts of people, but also from parts of dolls. Significantly enough, she chooses Susie’s eyes to be the creature’s eyes. Nevertheless, when the creature is ended, May feels that there is still something missing to make it really perfect. The creature is unable to see through Susie’s eyes, even though Susie has been May’s closest friend. May decides to give her creature a new eye, her own eye, the one to blame for the rejection suffered through her life. Finally she has found a friend who shares her way of looking at life, in a literal way. By giving her eye to the creature, May deprives herself not just of her main physical defect, but also of the particularity that makes her “special” in the way that Polly had stated. Eventually, the only way to render special May’s “perfect” friend is going to be by means of a touch of imperfection.

In opposition to Mary Shelley’s monster, May’s new friend is going to have a name which is going to be Amy, the anagram for May. In this case the creature is accepted by its maker and it is given a very significant name which underlines the fact that May wants to create her “other self”. An explanation for this might be found in the fact that only a monster can understand the feelings a monster, and inevitably, even if May changes her external aspect, she is always going to be a monster inside. Social intolerance spread in her the seed of monstrosity, and this is something that cannot be changed. As far as the only thing that May needs is understanding, the only way to fit her purposes is to create a projection of herself.

As opposed to Victor Frankenstein, May is going to be a caring creator who loves her creature. Moreover, she is going to be unable to find the words to express her happiness for having a friend. The final scene shows an agonising May covered in blood but with a smile on her face. Somewhere, between reality and imagination, she has given life to her creature. There is an opposition between the life that is given by means of science, and the life that is given by means of imagination; of course, the later is always more likely to survive because imagination, in opposition to science, has no limits. May's new friend caresses her face while she is falling asleep. Finally, May has found what she was looking for: acceptance and love.

References

- Bruhm, S. 2002. "The Contemporary Gothic: Why We Need It." *The Cambridge Companion to Gothic Fiction*. J. E. Hogle. Ed. Cambridge: CUP.
- Garrigós González, C. 2002. "El monstruo liberado (re)visiones contemporáneas de *Frankenstein*". *Estudios de Literatura Inglesa del siglo XX* (6). J. M. Barrio, P. Abad, J.M. Ruíz. Eds. Valladolid: Universidad de Valladolid.
- Lavalley, A. J. 1982. "The Stage and Film Children of *Frankenstein* : A Survey". *The Endurance of Frankenstein: Essays on Mary Shelley's Novel*. G. Levine and U.C. Knoepfmacher. Eds. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Lefevere, A. 1992. *Translation, Rewriting and the Manipulation of the Literary Frame*. London: Routledge.
- Menegaldo, G. 1998. "Le monstre court toujours...". *Figures Mythiques: Frankenstein*. G. Menegaldo. Ed. 16–61. Paris: Éditions Autrement.
- McKee, L. Dir. 2002. *May*. Lions Gate Films and 2 Loop Films.
- O'Flinn, P. 1995. "Production and Reproduction: The Case of *Frankenstein*". *Frankenstein: Contemporary Critical Essays*. F. Botting. Ed. Basingtoke and London: Macmillan.
- Pardo García, P. J. 2005. "Beyond Adaptation: *Frankenstein's* Postmodern Progeny". *Adaptation, Fidelity and Authorship*. M. Aragay. Ed. Amsterdam: Rodopi.
- Shelley, M. 1999 [1818]. *Frankenstein*. A. Ballesteros and S. Caporale. Eds. Salamanca: Almar Anglistica.